

War and Animal Killing

Anna Pellanda*

Professor of Political Economy (Retired), University of Padua, Italy

***Corresponding Author:** Anna Pellanda, Professor of Political Economy (Retired), University of Padua, Italy.

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Abstract

This brief note asks the question why, in the 21st century, are there still wars? Why has mankind not learned how to solve political, economic and ideological problems in a more civilized manner? We believe the answer lies in the inherently violent nature of human beings ever since they appeared on the planet, and in the fact that they had to hunt animals in order to survive, and thus became inured to the spilling of blood. With the arrival of farming in the Neolithic period (from the 9th to the 7th millennium BC) it would have been possible for human beings to stop killing animals. Instead, they have continued to murder them ever more brutally, right up to the invention of the barbaric intensive breeding farms of today.

From philosophers of the Ancient World to modern-day thinkers, writers have charted this path from prehistory to our own times, and shown how human beings' violence against animals contributes to their habit of taking up arms against each other.

Keywords: Wars; Animals; Breeding

Hunting and weapons in prehistory

In 1945 it seemed that the era of armed conflict was over for good, in Europe at least, but this has not been the case. Since 1968 there has been a succession of conflicts, from the Prague Spring (1968) to wars in the Balkans (1991), then Chechnya (1999), and the first war in Ukraine (2014). Looking beyond Europe, it is easy to find areas all over the world in the throes of conflict, destruction and indescribable suffering. Now, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it is natural to wonder yet again why, after living on this planet for centuries and centuries, human beings still try to deal with their political problems by waging war? Why can they not find another way to solve political, economic or ideological divergences of opinion, instead of resorting to violence? The production of weapons prospers during any conflict, as a direct result of this incapacity for a civilized confrontation. But why do we insist on equipping ourselves with increasingly sophisticated instruments of war instead of dedicating the resources spent on

doing so towards peacefully pursued goals? If, ever since human beings began to populate the Earth, they have never succeeded in living their lives without destroying other humans, or other living beings, it must mean that violence was born with mankind.

In the early period after the appearance of humans (two million years ago), in the Lower, Middle and Upper Paleolithic ages, the use of violence was associated with hunting (and fishing) with the aid of chipped stones. In the subsequent Mesolithic era (9th millennium before Christ), humans perfected their hunting and fishing methods with the invention of the bow and arrow. In the Neolithic (between the 9th and 7th millennium before Christ), they began to breed animals and developed their farming practices (already known in the Mesolithic) - as we know from the monochromatic hunting scenes in the Ebro valley and Valencia, in Spain. The nomadic hunters and gatherers gradually settled and became breeders and farmers, their chipped stones became smoother (neo-lithos), and flint stone was used to produce the tips of arrows, hammers, and

other tools. These changes are documented by pictorial works found on rock faces in the Sahara, at burial sites, and on religious monuments like the “cramlech” at Stonehenge in England. The Neolithic period was the last chapter of prehistory, with the great invention of metals - copper, bronze and iron - that, combined with the use of fire (already known in the Lower Paleolithic), enabled humans to produce blades of flint and other increasingly efficient weapons and tools, no longer for hunting purposes alone. They began to use their new tools to till the soil and make their farming and breeding practices more efficient. Animals had gone from hunting humans to being hunted, and then put to work on the farm. Humans had always been omnivorous, and their new way of life brought changes to their diet, ensuring their survival thanks to increasingly effective farming practices, while hunting gradually declined in importance.

Violence against other humans is a habit learned from violence against animals

Up until this time, human beings, their hunting (and fishing) methods, and their weaponry had developed at the same pace. This contemporaneity is what justifies the brief historical account that opens this note about war. If humans had not invented weapons for their survival, rather than for the purpose of waging war, they would not have killed any animals. The first forms of human violence were directed against animals. But when it was no longer necessary to kill to eat, humans continued to kill animals. From the Neolithic onwards, the development of farming led, especially in Mesopotamia, to the growing of edible plants and the breeding of animals. Goats were bred for their milk, cattle and horses for their meat, and horsepower. They all met with violent, and sometimes ritual death. But the killing of a bull made the Pythagoreans, Zarathustra and Theophrastus indignant. It was condemned by Ovid in his verses: *“Do not, I beg you, do this and concentrate your minds on my admonitions! When you place the flesh of slaughtered cattle in your mouths, know and feel, that you are devouring your fellow-creature”* [1]. Plutarch described this historical process in the following terms: *“...those people who first ventured upon eating of flesh, it is very probable that the whole reason of their so doing was scarcity and want of other food; hunger gave no time, nor did seed-time then stay for the yearly season”*. He then posed the fundamental question: *“But whence is it that a certain ravenousness and frenzy drives you in these happy days to pollute yourselves with blood, since you have such an abundance of things necessary for*

your subsistence?” [2]. In answer, he said that it is the unjustified sacrifice of animals that perpetuates human beings’ recourse to violence, making them accustomed to feeling no disgust at the sight of the animals’ blood and injuries, or even to enjoying it when they are slain and dying [3]. It was Plutarch again who described how killing can become a habit: *“Even so, in the beginning, some wild and mischievous beast was killed and eaten, and then some little bird or fish was entrapped. And the love of slaughter, being first experimented and exercised in these, at last passed even to the laboring ox, and the sheep that clothes us, and to the poor cock that keeps the house; until by little and little, unsatiableness being strengthened by use, men came to the slaughter of men, to bloodshed and wars”* [4]. The ways in which human beings have brutally dominated animals ever since prehistory have inured them to taking the life of living beings, and to envisaging the spilling of blood as the obvious solution to their problems. What the cave dwellers were obliged to do to defend themselves from wild animals and procure the food they needed to survive has become a habit of cruelty. Humans’ lack of compassion for their cruel treatment of animals has turned into a habit of brutality towards other human beings as well. This is what St. Thomas Aquinas feared when he wrote that brutality against animals should be forbidden: *“lest from practicing cruelties on dumb animals one should go on further to do the like to men”* [5]. It is on the strength of these considerations of the Greek philosophers and St. Thomas Aquinas that the present brief contribution finds its explanation for mankind’s continuing recourse to war. We draw on the words of Erasmus of Rotterdam, who perfected the concept by writing: *“he which (by no injury provoked) was accustomed to spill the blood of a harmless beast, would in his anger, being provoked by injury, not fear to slay a man. Taking things, a step further, he would go to war”* [6].

There is more to humans’ brutal treatment of animals, however, than its explanation for the horrors of war. Over the centuries, the ways in which animals are treated have changed and become more efficient. The farming practices of old have been replaced by technologies that have hugely expanded the opportunities for humans to exploit animals. We allude here to the enormous intensive breeding farms, where animals are raised in cages so small they cannot move, and from which they only emerge to be taken to the slaughterhouse. They suffer physical mutilation (to piglets’ tails, for instance), females are chemically inseminated, growth hormones are used to speed up the animals’ development, and antibiotics to

prevent disease in their impossible living conditions. Then there are the so-called 'sports' like bull-fighting and other such practices in various countries, where animals are horribly mistreated by humans too cowardly to face them on more equal terms, and there is the scientific research hypocritically conducted on animals in the name of concern for human life. Intensive breeding causes air pollution (due to the animals' greenhouse gas emissions) and a meat-rich diet causes diseases, but greedy humans the world over will not give up eating animals - even raw (as happens at the notorious Chinese "wet markets" responsible for the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus). Animals are mankind's favorite victims, and human beings show not the slightest pity for the suffering they inflict on them, with the excuse that animals have no soul. Human indifference to the suffering of animals finds support in Jewish-Christian anthropocentrism [7], and in Islamic utilitarianism [8]. Great philosophers like Aristotle [9] and Descartes [10] were also convinced that animals are unworthy of our consideration, but this does not justify humans' barbaric treatment of them - especially for futile purposes, and in cases where a substitute could easily be found. So, as long as humans torture animals to satisfy their gluttony, their exhibitionism in the way they dress, and their superficiality in their choice of entertainment, it is hardly surprising - as Theophrastus pointed out - that if they do not refuse to kill other living species, then they are hardly likely to refuse to kill those of their own species [11].

Conclusion

The answer to the question of why war is still, in the 21st century, used to solved political, economic and ideological problems probably lies in the violence that human beings developed as soon as they appeared on the planet. The roots of this violence lie in mankind's prehistorical need to hunt in order to feed and clothe themselves. This need led to their invention of better and better weapons for killing animals and made them become inured to the sight of blood and indifferent to suffering of other living beings. Modern-day man's continuing recourse to war and to all sorts of barbaric exploitation of animals are the result of his anthropocentric acceptance of a brutality that is no longer justified by any scarcity of resources.

Bibliography

1. ODVID. "The *Metamorphoses*, XV, 139-142
2. PLUTARCH, *De esu carnium (On Meat-Eating)*, II A 994.
3. *Idem*, 4, II c 998
4. *Idem*, d-f 959
5. St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, CXII, pp. 2562.
6. ERASMUS of ROTTERDAM, *Dulce bellum inexpertis*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 1517, p. 7.
7. "God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals and all the creatures that creep along the ground'." Bible, *Genesis*, 1, 26. Cf. also *Gen.* 1, 27, 28, 29.
8. "And Allah has made your homes a place to rest and has given you tents from the hide of animals, light to handle when you travel and when you camp. And out of their wool, fur, and hair He has given you furnishings and goods for a while". Koran, XVI, 80. Cf. also V, 96; XVI, 14; XVI, 66; VIII, 60; LIX, 6.
9. Aristotele was of the opinion that animals, be they wild or domestic, were subject to the will of humans because they are slaves by nature. ARISTOTELE, *The Politics*, I, 1253-1255.
10. Descartes took a particularly strong stance, saying that there are two errors that divert man from virtue: the denial of God and the claim that the soul of animals is of the same nature as our own. DESCARTES, R., *Discourse on the Method*, Parts V and VI.
11. THEOPHRASTUS, *On Piety*, VIII, 31, 3.